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ABSTRACT

A study examined the attitudes of experienced vocational agriculture teachers concerning the proper ingredients for excellence in teaching. The 14 Ohio teachers who constituted the study population were selected from 130 teachers nominated by Ohio state supervisors and teacher educators as being master teachers; the grounds for selection were that each of the 14 had received 3 or more nominations. Next, 7 of the 14 teachers were randomly selected to complete an opinionaire on what it takes to attain excellence in teaching. Of the essential ingredients offered by the study participants, the following eight were selected for a thorough content analysis: keep technically up to date, be motivated, be interested in the student, set directions, evaluate performance, develop a positive attitude, use community resources, and have a high-quality supervised occupational experience program for each student. (Each of these items is discussed in this report.) (MN)

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THE INGREDIENTS NECESSARY FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

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Major Objectives and/or Focus

What is excellence in teaching? Excellence in teaching involves a combination of ingredients all blended together in proper proportion not unlike the process of making a good cake or pie. The essential ingredients are probably the same for every good teacher, but the exact quantity of each, and the method of blending them will undoubtedly vary with each teacher.

Teachers of vocational agriculture usually have both high school and adult age level students. The beginning teacher of these groups, yes, even the veteran who aspires to be a master teacher, seeks to learn the proper ingredients for excellence in teaching.

Some members of the agricultural profession, in attempting to describe excellence in teaching to the beginning teacher as well as to the veteran, will say, "Take a look at John Doe and Mary Doe; they are master teachers. Just be the kind of teacher they are, and you'll be successful."

This often-heard suggestion prompted these researchers to ask selected vocational agriculture teachers to share their beliefs as to the proper ingredients for excellence in teaching.

Perspective(s) or Theoretical Framework

Teacher educators and teachers have long sought the ingredients of excellence in teaching. Rosenshine and Furst (1971) have proposed eleven attributes necessary for teaching excellence and enhancing student performance. McKeachie (1976) listed nine characteristics of effective teaching that he states are based on what psychologists have learned about human behavior.

Foster (1976) has suggested that educators must begin to consider the emotional, developmental, and maturation needs of learners in the learning process, while continuing to give importance to subject matter content.

It seems logical that in "starting where we are" and moving to "where we wish to be," we must determine "where we wish to be" or "what a master teacher is" in order to set goals and to begin to progress in preparing teachers to be "master" teachers.

Methods and/or Techniques

This was qualitative/ethnographic research. The researchers were not testing an hypothesis, but were observing without preconceived ideas.

In order to determine who the master vocational agriculture teachers of Ohio are, both teacher educators and state supervisors of vocational agriculture were asked to nominate at least ten vocational agriculture teachers whom they considered to be "master teachers." Seventy-four teachers were nominated by the state supervisors, and fifty-six were nominated by the teacher educators. Fourteen teachers (those who received three or more nominations) were the target population. Seven master

teachers were than randomly selected from the fourteen for the study. These randomly selected master teachers were provided a mail opinionaire asking the respondent to complete the statement, "I believe teaching excellence in vocational agriculture involves _____."

Data Source

After the opinionaires were returned, any problems concerning the interpretation of the opinionaire content were handled through both written and phone communication with the respective master teacher.

Common ingredients of excellence in teaching were selected through content analysis from the returned opinionaires. The data were then analyzed to determine the statistically significant ingredients of excellence in teaching, i.e., the characteristics of a "master teacher."

Results and/or Conclusions/Points of View

Of the essential ingredients for excellence in teaching offered by the participants in the study, eight characteristics of a master teacher were selected through content analysis: (1) Keep technically up-to-date; (2) Be motivated; (3) Be interested in the student; (4) Set directions; (5) Evaluate performance; (6) Develop a positive attitude; (7) Use community resources; and (8) Have a high quality supervised occupational experience program for each student.

The respondents qualified their beliefs concerning the essential ingredients or characteristics with supporting statements. The statements gave depth and breadth to the meaning of the characteristics.

These essential ingredients for excellence, as offered by these master teachers, can benefit all of us who teach or who work with those who do.

Keep technically up-to-date

"Keeping technically up-to-date is a must for teachers if they want to be effective," say our master teachers. As one teacher put it, "... I feel a strong obligation to keep current, informed. Agriculture is a dynamic, exciting, sometimes discouraging, but always rapidly changing field. The successful teacher must keep up. The teacher who does not do this risks losing credibility. The one who does (keep up technically) not only has a lot to offer the students, but experiences a great deal of personal satisfaction."

Keeping abreast of current agricultural knowledge has to be a constant effort, according to another teacher. However, there are rewards for the effort. "Since agriculture has become such a technical field, it is necessary to keep yourself up-to-date by attending workshops, field days and (by) constantly reading. The reward for you as a teacher comes when you see these young people grow and develop into leaders."

Be motivated

Achieving the goal of being a master teacher requires motivation for both the teacher and the students. As one production teacher sees it, "I find motivation and attitude as the two key ingredients of a student's success pattern. As a teacher, trying to find how to motivate each student and to build a positive self-image is the real challenge that makes teaching interesting."

Some master teachers pattern themselves after a former teacher. "I remember my master teachers not necessarily for what they taught me in subject matter (and yet they were my best subject matter teachers), but for the motivation they gave me to be somebody special."

"The big challenge in working with students," says another teacher, "is getting them to dig down deep inside and use their ability. The teacher must become a motivator using such phrases as 'You can accomplish,' 'You can succeed,' 'You can excel,' 'You can be among the top ten,' and 'You are capable of doing better.'"

Be interested in the student

Sometimes the teacher assumes the role of a parent, not only in counseling the student but in the degree of concern shown for the student. This degree of concern is described by one teacher: "I think of every student in my class as part of my family, and I care about that student. I am not just interested in the facts they may learn in my class today, but I hope I can challenge them to set goals and aspire to greater achievements than they have ever dreamed possible."

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In another teacher's viewpoint, being a good teacher is somewhat like being a good parent. "I believe excellence in teaching rarely occurs unless the teacher naturally possesses or has learned to develop the same feelings toward students that a good parent has toward his own children. He is anxious to see them develop to their fullest potential, he's proud of their accomplishments, he's sad when they fail, and he disciplines them when behavior is less than acceptable. It's not just that he is very aware of the needs of his individual students; he wants so much to see each of them 'make it.' He plans every lesson and each activity so that it automatically provides opportunity for the student to achieve and progress."

"Every student is special," is the belief of the master teacher. One teacher summed up that belief with these words: "... I believe each student is a unique individual with important needs, and he or she deserves the best I have to offer. I think in terms of reverse roles: What would I want to be taught? Or, what would I want a teacher to do for my own children? I'd want the best, and the best is seldom easy (to give)."

Set directions

"A good teacher will have definite goals." The master teachers state that these goals apply both to the teacher and to the student. Goals cannot be set too early. One teacher has this philosophy: "Although goal-setting and evaluation are daily functions, I like to make long-run plans about July 1. A new teaching year begins

then and this is a good time to set goals for the coming year for myself and the program."

The direction teachers set for themselves should be realistic, attainable, and tailored for the individual. Claims one teacher, "Success is possible for the teacher of vocational agriculture if he or she is willing to apply himself/herself to the job, develop a program of agriculture that fits the needs of the community, and at the same time develop a program the given teacher can manage. Don't look at someone who is teaching and say, 'I have to do everything they are doing or I won't be successful.' Use others for ideas, not for duplication, and let your own personality show in your teaching."

Another teacher cautions, "... directions should be set for each student in his/her chosen field and not necessarily for the advancement (prestige) of the teacher. Directions do not necessarily mean winning contests, chapter awards, etc...."

Evaluate performance

No teacher can improve without asking the question (and carefully considering the answers), "How am I doing?" "Evaluating the past year," suggests one teacher, "will help to revise the curriculum and prepare yourself educationally and mentally for the coming year."

Students also need to develop the ability to self-evaluate. A good teacher will help them develop this ability. Some advice about this help is given by a Western Ohio teacher, who urges

"... a teacher to be a little fussy. Students who don't do a good job according to their abilities do it over. An example is record books. All of my students get an 'A' on their record books when they are completed and turned in, because I won't accept a record book that's not complete and accurate. I show them what needs to be corrected and improved and give it back to them to correct."

Develop a positive attitude

There's no question in the minds of our master teachers that a teacher's degree of success is affected by his/her attitude. As summed up by one teacher, "... teaching excellence...involves...a very healthy, positive attitude about one's self, one's students, and the job purpose. A positive mental attitude is hard to conceal; it is almost contagious. It is 'caught' not only by the students, but also by nearly everyone else the teacher comes in contact with."

Helping students develop a positive attitude toward learning is also the mark of teaching excellence. States one teacher, "I keep a sign in front of the classroom which reads, 'Learning is Fun,' and learning really is fun. Sometimes those of us teaching work at making it (learning) dull, monotonous, and a drudgery." This same teacher echoes an earlier premise, "... teaching excellence...involves a caring attitude, a desire to do your best, and pride in your work."

How does a teacher go about developing this positive attitude? A Northern Ohio teacher suggests that "... summer is...a good time, since I've been out of the classroom for a month, to get myself enthused and (to) build up confidence."

Use community resources

A master teacher of vocational agriculture needs to know many things. Included in this long list is the community. "Knowing your students and your community is very important," exclaims one teacher. "There are many interested people within a community and they are very willing to help a teacher build and improve a program. Many times people in the community can help evaluate and improve a program, but they must be involved in order to do so."

A high quality supervised occupational experience program for each student

Master teachers of vocational agriculture believe in high quality supervised occupational experience programs for their students. Occupational experience programs provide a means by which the teacher gets to know the student better. Such programs also help ensure that the student develops needed skills, attitudes and understandings for successful entry into their chosen career. As one master teacher explained the value of occupational experience programs, "Supervising the students' occupational experience programs is one of the best ways of demonstrating our interest in them." Another teacher added, "Visiting the student at the farm or occupational work position brings you to the student's world. I believe supervised occupational visits help both student and teacher grow in respect and trust for one another. Supervised experience ensures good student performance."

Educational or Scientific Implications/Importance of Study

What the master teachers have told us about excellence in teaching seems to be this: excellent teaching involves more than the traditionally advocated characteristics or traits enumerated by professionals such as Rosenshine and Furst (1971), and taught in the usual college pedagogical courses. Excellent teaching centers around the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the job. Teaching is student-centered: the objectives of the teacher, the motivation to act, the evaluation of teacher performance, all start and end with the student. Perhaps the instruction for our teaching methods courses ought to give more emphasis to the development of the ingredients for excellence in teaching seen as so important by these master teachers.

Additional Research

In order to more specifically substantiate the common ingredients for excellence in teaching, as well as to determine the proper blend of these ingredients, it is believed that the following areas need further study.

1. Compare with master teachers of vocational agriculture the ingredients for excellence in teaching as perceived by non-vocational agriculture teachers.
2. Obtain perceptions of teacher educators, state supervisors and other teachers of vocational agriculture as to their perceived ingredients for excellence in teaching. These perceptions would then be compared.

3. Analyze video taped instruction of master teachers and teachers of vocational agriculture not considered to be master teachers, to verify the ingredients for excellence in teaching.
4. Obtain perceptions of excellence in teaching from present students, former students, and school administrators of master teachers and teachers of vocational agriculture not considered to be master teachers. The interviews would attempt to determine if the ingredients for excellence in teaching advocated by master teachers are actually practiced by them in their schools and communities.

Suggested studies (1) and (2) above are already completed, but the data have not been analyzed as of the writing of this paper. Studies (3) and (4) are in the planning stage, with a graduate research associate preparing to do the taping and the interviewing.

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